

COMMENTARY

WHAT TO DO ABOUT "DANGEROUS" TEXTBOOKS

The Pitfalls of Pressure Tactics

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ONE evening last June, a Mrs. Julius Y. Talmadge, at a meeting of the Georgia State Board of Education, denounced Frank Magruder's *American Government* as unfit for use as a social studies textbook, because it "advocates strengthening the United Nations Charter." Actually, Mrs. Talmadge's outburst was superfluous,

WHEN parents pore over their children's textbooks, there is cause for wonder. When parents and others begin to read with a censor's eye—watch out! It is a sign that trouble threatens the free interchange of ideas between teacher and student that has been the basis of education for responsible citizenship in our American society, from Jefferson's day on. Recently, under the spur of clamorous complaints registered by certain "100 per cent American" organizations, a suspicion has been raised in many people's minds that a shockingly large number of textbooks are carriers of "subversion." As a result, some textbooks have been banned altogether, while in various communities—including New York State—official investigations are under way. What basis in fact is there for this agitated concern? If none, why the clamor? If some, what ought to be done about it? It is to such urgent questions that EDWARD N. SAVETH here turns his attention. Mr. Saveth earned his doctorate at Columbia University and at present teaches courses in American historical writing and American intellectual history at the New School for Social Research. He is the author of *American Historians and European Immigrants* (1948).

for the fate of the Magruder book had been sealed a few months before when the Board had decided that the book was likely to subvert young Georgians, despite an editorial plea in the *Atlanta Constitution* that "Governor Talmadge was taught from the book, as were most of the men and women in public life in Georgia, and we defy the Board to prove it has made subversives, socialists, or radicals of them." The plea was to no avail. The meeting of the Board which Mrs. Talmadge addressed ordered the 30,000 copies of Magruder in use in the Georgia schools to be called in and sold—out of the state, of course.

Georgia is not the only place where textbooks have been undergoing critical scrutiny by eyes that once happily had forsworn them; and Magruder's text is not the only one to have been attacked.* In dozens of communities throughout the United States, according to the American Textbook Publishers Institute, adults have grimly been plodding through children's homework. In Port Washington, Long Island; Englewood, New Jersey; Washington, D.C.; Little Rock,

* The ban on Magruder was "temporarily suspended" late in November by the Georgia Board of Education. It also appointed a special professional textbook committee to review the 1952 edition of Magruder, after authorizing use of the controversial 1951 edition for the current year. It may be safely assumed that Magruder will be news in Georgia for some months to come.

Arkansas; and Houston, Texas, campaigns have been mounted against certain of the books, and counter-campaigns have been launched in their defense. John W. Finger, president of the Sons of the American Revolution, demanded on May 22 a Congressional investigation of textbooks and teaching materials "which tend to undermine faith in fundamental American economic and political principles. . . ." Harold Rugg's appearance as a speaker at Ohio State University early in August was a signal for renewed assault upon his books by a local section of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. On November 13, the New York State Federation of Women's Clubs adopted a resolution calling on the State Department of Education to investigate teaching and textbooks in public schools "as to the extent, if any, of subversive indoctrination found therein." The women were not to be denied: by December 22, the New York State Board of Regents had moved to appoint a commission to investigate whether there were any school textbooks inducing to subversion.

The textbook publishers cautioned communities at the beginning of the last school term to guard against "whisperings that your child's textbooks are subversive—that they advocate Socialism, Communism, Collectivism, or 'New Dealism.'" Such insinuations, they warned, are harbingers of a broader offensive "which will undermine your confidence in your child's teachers, which will pit neighbor against neighbor and religion against religion."

By now, the struggle over textbooks has climbed from the level of insinuations to that of noisy outcries. Where are people of good will to stand in this fight? Obviously, no one wants to see the fundamental principles of freedom treated contemptuously in our textbooks. But is this really the situation? And if so, how is it to be met?

EFFORTS to ban textbooks, particularly those in the social sciences, are not infrequent on the American scene. They are initiated by persistent pressure groups, the most vocal of which are the watchdogs of

100 per cent Americanism (generally interpreted as demanding unstinting support of laissez-faire economics), certain racial and religious groups, and some business organizations. All these watchdogs are amazingly, if understandably, sensitive to any opinion that the author of a textbook might express, especially to what he might say or fail to say about them. They are, moreover, trigger-quick in demanding direct action, in the form of a ban, against the books they disapprove of. The contemporary onslaught upon the schoolbooks, although not without its unique flavor, is largely in this traditional pattern.

Today's assault upon the books is mounted from both the "right" and the "left"—these terms are hardly adequate descriptions of the two forces, but they will have to serve in lieu of better ones. On the political "right," two relatively recently formed organizations—the National Council for American Education and the Conference of American Small Business Organizations—have taken over the main share in alerting conservative or reactionary opinion to "dangerous" books. Allen A. Zoll, who heads the former, has come up from the ranks of the chauvinist, isolationist, and anti-Semitic agitators of the 1930's and 1940's to emerge as a full-fledged authority on education in 1952. Zoll's old organization, American Patriots, Inc., was included in the December 1947 Attorney General's list of "totalitarian, fascist, Communist, or subversive" organizations. His new outfit, organized to exploit whatever pickings the educational field has to offer, nearly died aborning when Frederick Woltman's article, "Zoll, Hate-monger, Promotes New Racket," appeared in the *New York World-Telegram* on August 25, 1948; the article led to the resignation of General Jonathan Wainwright and Gene Tunney from the organization's governing board. Yet, despite the exposé of Zoll's activities, his organization was still effective enough to contribute substantially to the ouster of the progressive educator Dr. Willard E. Goslin from his post as superintendent of Pasadena's schools. His denunciatory reviews of textbooks which do not

conform to his own perverted standards of Americanism have been used in attacks upon specific titles in Englewood, New Jersey, and elsewhere.

While Zoll is not to be underestimated, the principal leader in the present campaign against textbooks is Mrs. Lucille Cardin Crain, editor of the *Educational Reviewer*. This quarterly publication, made up almost entirely of reviews of textbooks and teaching materials, is published by the Committee on Education of the Conference of American Small Business Organizations. Mrs. Crain's background is quite different from Zoll's. She was co-author in 1948 of a well-argued pamphlet entitled "Packaged Thinking for Women," which was published by the National Industrial Conference Board to combat the influence of liberal and leftist thinking among clubwomen. Apparently the *Educational Reviewer* is designed to carry this work into the area of teaching materials. Mrs. Crain has a staff of reviewers whose evaluation of textbooks and teaching materials is "biased in favor of personal liberty and economic liberty, which are indivisible, and which are the basis of the American system." The reviews, she is frank in admitting, "measure school and college materials by the criteria of liberty and responsibility, rather than by the currently voiced standards of 'rights and duties' to be parcelled out at the hands of bureaucrats." In the light of these criteria, the great majority of the books reviewed are assailed for "undermining the principles of private enterprise" or indoctrinating toward socialism.

THE effectiveness of Mrs. Crain's *Educational Reviewer* is apparent from what happened to Frank A. Magruder's *American Government*—the most widely used textbook in its field—after an attack upon it in the first issue. *American Government* was charged with being a medium for the spread of statist propaganda and with taking a view of democracy that "leads straight from Rousseau, through Marx, to totalitarianism." The author, in treating of inequality of income, is charged with following the Communist party

line. Why? Because, states the *Reviewer*, Magruder habitually refers to poor people as "underprivileged" and "unfortunate." The *Reviewer* then explains that Magruder's errors are less the result of conscious propagandizing than the consequences of his being victimized by his bibliography. "Major reliance is placed on the pamphlet material of the Foreign Policy Association and the Public Affairs Committee, which have been charged again and again with the use of party-line propaganda, and are certainly not fitted for classroom use."

The *Reviewer's* analysis of Magruder was picked up by radio commentator Fulton Lewis Jr. and broadcast to a nationwide audience. Then came the banning of the book in Houston, Texas, and throughout Georgia. In Little Rock, Arkansas, Magruder was dropped as a textbook but managed to hang on as a reference work. In Council Bluffs, Iowa, the superintendent of schools, in anticipation of an attack upon Magruder, had some of his teachers prepare a defense of the book—a step which was also taken in Jackson, Michigan, after a local newspaper had repeated the *Reviewer's* charges against it. In Washington, D. C., Magruder and other books which the *Reviewer* found objectionable were attacked by a member of the school board. Finding the majority of the Washington board unsympathetic, this member promptly appealed to the Committee of the House of Representatives for the District of Columbia, where he met with a greater degree of understanding.

Certainly this kind of development presents those of us who believe in the democratic process with a serious dilemma, and one which it will not be easy to solve. No one would—or could—deny to Mrs. Crain, Mr. Zoll, or anyone else the right to criticize textbooks; nor would anyone in his senses deny that our textbooks need criticizing. At the same time, however, this "criticism" has about it an air of lynch law that is bound to make us feel very uncomfortable. What textbook could stand up against national broadcasts, editorials, the whole apparatus of modern propaganda that is unleashed on a particular

book by commentators who may not even have read it, but consider a few quotations sufficient to condemn the entire text? Moreover, there is the question of the nature of this criticism. There is little doubt that the doctrinaire single-mindedness, the "packaged thinking," of the *Reviewer's* analysis of textbooks breathes more of an authoritarian spirit than a democratic spirit of willingness to see more than one side of a particular problem. Commenting upon the textbook reviews in the *Educational Reviewer*, the Congressional Committee on Lobbying Activities in House Report 3232 said: "The review of textbooks by self-appointed experts, especially when undertaken under the aegis of an organization having a distinct legislative axe to grind, smacks too much of the book-burning orgies of Nuremberg to be accepted by thoughtful Americans without foreboding and alarm. It suggests, too, that the reviewers profoundly distrust the integrity, good faith, and plain common sense of the school boards and teachers of the country." The long-run aim of the *Educational Reviewer*, continued the Committee report, "is nothing less than the establishment of [its own] philosophy as the standard educational orthodoxy in the schools of the nation."

ODDLY enough, there are those who manage to reconcile an all-out attack on Mrs. Crain's methods with the use on their own part of the very same tactics—for different reasons, of course. The kind of censorship that Mr. Zoll and Mrs. Crain, on the political "right," attempt to impose upon textbooks is paralleled on the political "left" by the Teachers Union's report on "Bias and Prejudice in Textbooks in Use in New York City Schools." The Teachers Union is formally against either the banning of books or their censorship, and objected when the Board of Education removed the *Nation* from the libraries of the New York schools. But the Teachers Union's remedy for about twenty-seven books whose attitudes toward immigrant and minority groups in America are found objectionable, boils down to demanding that the Board take more of the

same sort of action that it did in the case of the *Nation*. Insisting that it is opposed to censorship, the Teachers Union pamphlet simultaneously demands that books which it considers biased be "scrapped or corrected."

Even as the *Educational Reviewer's* criticism of Magruder is outrageous in its unfairness, some of the techniques of "content analysis" used in the Teachers Union report are, to put it mildly, not above suspicion. The report cites an American history textbook as stating of the Ku Klux Klan: "Its purposes were patriotic, but its methods cannot be defended." Certainly, the first part of this sentence, as it stands, is ridiculously naive. However, this passage is excerpted out of a 35-line discussion of the Klan in the course of which that organization is soundly condemned. This type of content analysis, by the way, is a weakness not only of the Teachers Union report, but of many other studies which pull out of the textbooks merely such information as is needed to sustain the investigator's point of view.

Indeed, insofar as doctrinaire liberals and "leftists" have had the power, they have moved, at times, against textbooks with a sledge-hammer approach, going so far as to make a public demonstration against an offending paragraph. Consider what happened to the college textbook *The Growth of the American Republic*, by Professors Samuel Eliot Morison of Harvard and Henry Steele Commager of Columbia, when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (a genuinely liberal organization which should have known better) objected to the authors' treatment of Negroes during the pre-Civil War and Reconstruction periods of our history. The text in question is well written, scholarly, and liberal in its point of view. However, early in 1950, at the College of the City of New York, the Morison and Commager volume was charged by the college chapter of the NAACP and other campus organizations—including the fellow-traveling Young Progressives of America—with offering a biased treatment of the Negro as slave and freedman. The history department was not exactly pleased

with the book's account of the Negro; but it insisted that the text was a good one and that its shortcomings in this particular point could be made up for by the instructor in the course of classroom discussion. Because of this firm stand, the book continues in use there. However, a year later at Queens College, also in New York City, the college chapter of the NAACP demanded that *The Growth of the American Republic* be dropped as a text by the history department; the college administration gave way, and its first volume was banned for classroom use. Substituted for it was Volume One of J. D. Hicks's *The Federal Union*, a good book that happens to contain the following remark: "Slave women rarely resisted the advances of white men, as their numerous mulatto progeny abundantly attested." It is perhaps unnecessary to add that this sentence, taken out of context, does not prove Professor Hicks a biased author. Above all, let us hope that it will not provide ammunition for still another campaign at Queens.

IN ALL this fuss about textbooks, two quite distinct questions are involved. The first is: How bad are the textbooks? The second: If they are bad, what is the best way of seeing that they become better?

Sometimes textbooks are written by the leading men in a particular field; more often they are written by run-of-the-mill educators with no little assistance from the editorial office of the publisher, some years after the work of the leading men has seeped down through the classrooms of the teachers' colleges. In consequence of the time lag, and because textbooks long obsolescent continue to be used, such books reflect the expert thinking of ten or twenty years ago. (Dealing with questions of race and immigration, they may reflect the bigoted or naive views of many leading sociologists twenty or thirty years ago, emphasizing the superiority of the "old immigrants" from Northern and Western Europe over the "new immigrants" from Southern and Eastern Europe.) And if we consider the way economists were talking about the American economy fifteen

years ago—in the middle of the wreckage of the 1929 crisis, when the unaided efforts of capitalists only succeeded in deepening the depression, when businessmen cried out for government loans, government regulation, and government planning, when so many people saw in an unregulated economic system the cause of the depression—it is easy to see why many textbooks emphasize the weaknesses of a free economy, the importance of planning, and the value of governmental control. Their authors, from the perspective of 1952, would probably view governmental control of economic life as a not unmixed blessing. Nevertheless, these textbooks continue to instruct in the intellectual spirit of the 1930's.

Admittedly, any view on economics or immigration or anything else is not immune to criticism simply by virtue of having found the refuge of a textbook; admittedly textbooks cannot be above the judgment of the community; admittedly, the more criticism we have, the better. As Professor Preston H. Epps of the University of North Carolina writes in the December issue of *School and Society*, writers and teachers "must and will, of course, submit to criticism from the society. . . ." But what should be the process of this criticism? How can the community act so as really to improve textbooks without wrecking its school system?

TO ANSWER this important question, it is instructive to consider how our textbooks have been improved in the past—how the simple-minded and gushingly optimistic economic texts of the 20's and early 30's were replaced by the more critical works which are now themselves under attack, how the incorrect and dangerous views of earlier writers on immigration are being (gradually, it is true) replaced by more adequate discussions.

The principal method has been that of professional criticism—criticism by educators and scholars within the field, themselves disturbed at the divergence between the most authoritative findings of research and the views presented in textbooks. Most scholars

today will freely concede that there is a good deal wrong with our textbooks. They are not so well written as they might be; their treatment of immigrant and minority groups as well as many other subjects (e.g. the Soviet Union) is hopelessly outdated; and on several matters pertaining to economics and government the pupil is not offered the kind of information which will enable him to understand the world in which he lives.

Realizing this, the professional critic—in studied contrast to the pressure group—nevertheless tries to lean over backwards to avoid scapegoating any particular author, title, and publisher. The study of the American Council on Education entitled *Intergroup Relations in Teaching Materials* takes elaborate precautions against this possibility. The investigation of economics education carried out by the Brookings Institution for the Sloan Foundation, while generally critical of the social studies textbooks for failing to provide reasonably adequate materials in economics, nevertheless would have none of them banned. (The Brookings study, incidentally, evaluates the Magruder text as sympathetic to the idea of governmental controls, but also points to Magruder's warning that too much governmental interference would stifle individual initiative. Brookings' President, Dr. H. G. Moulton, and his collaborator Dr. D. W. McKee, chairman of the Department of Economics at Westminster College, are by no means completely satisfied with Magruder's approach to economic education—but they propose writing better books rather than banning this one.) When the results of Dr. Richard W. Burkhardt's study of the treatment of the Soviet Union in textbooks were made known, the releases were so worded that no book could be blamed for what the author felt was a general failure on the part of almost all books to provide information necessary for a proper understanding of Russian affairs.

What improvement there has been in the American textbook in the past quarter century has been primarily in response to professional criticism rather than to pressure groups wielding clubs. Pressure groups have

scored victories in getting one book banned and another altered. But isolated victories mean nothing without the support of professional opinion. During the 1920's, under the impact of a demand by super-patriots that certain "un-American" passages be removed from the books, authors and publishers did make revisions. But Professor Allan Nevins, recalling the hectic textbook quarrels of that day, points out that "the controversy ultimately died away" and the reinterpretations of the Revolutionary War and certain "heroic" episodes in our history, to which such strong objections were made, eventually "triumphed all along the line." Similarly, the substantial improvement in the treatment of racial and immigrant minorities in today's textbooks, compared with those published in the 1920's, has been far less the result of crusades against specific titles than of scholars' insistence upon the truth as they saw it.

IT IS true that there may be times when recognized scholars, limited by a specialist's viewpoint or swayed by prevailing winds of doctrine, will profess opinions even on their own subject that are open to criticism by an alert and perceptive citizenry. It is true that there may be times when it will be up to individuals or agencies concerned with the public good—or even with the interests of special groups—to air a situation which the profession itself is too slow to improve. It is true that there can be no monopoly where ideas are concerned and that a critic writing in a general magazine may sometimes give us a more broadly informed and socially responsible evaluation of a book than a scholar writing in a professional journal.

But, even so, the aim should be to discover and spread truth, not to deploy the greatest concentration of power and issue a ban. If the NAACP is disturbed at the way two of America's most distinguished historians treat the history of the American Negro—then it might be more constructive to encourage criticism and research to show they are wrong than to mobilize political resources in a power struggle to ban the book. The same is true of Jewish agencies concerned with the treat-

ment of the later immigrants among whom the Jews bulked so large: their aim should be to show that certain charges are false; that certain facts have not been taken account of; that certain generalizations are only partial, distorted reflections of reality; and this is properly work for educators, sociologists, historians, and cultural critics, not public relations experts.

This is a rather slow process—education always is, even when it is a question of educating educators—and will not appeal to the impatient. But the impatient would do well to realize that there is nothing faster that promises any enduring improvement. Banning books may soothe outraged feelings; but only discussion, education, and criticism can get genuinely better books written.

CRITICISM and discussion not only promise more real improvement than pressure tactics; they rule out of court the undemocratic and un-American textbook ban, so akin to the book-burning procedures of Nazis and Communists. In the meantime, however, it is clear we shall have to deal directly with the offensive of the book-burners.

The authors and publishers, whom one might expect to be the first line of defense, seem to have decided that discretion is the better part of valor. The authors of books under attack have said very little in reply to their critics, and their silence is apparently dictated by the publishers. The textbook business, as businesses go, is a small one, amounting to about \$96,000,000 annually split among sixty different houses. Blood, sweat, and tears go into securing the adoption of textbooks; but when a particular title is under attack the publisher is likely to fear that a too hearty rejoinder would itself advertise the attack and spread it to other communities; and that prolonged controversy over one title might jeopardize future adoptions. Instinctively, the tendency of the publisher is to stand clear of such situations. Magruder's publisher, for example, has not fought back and has made significant changes in the dead author's text.

Yet it is perhaps unfair to blame the in-

dividual publisher, since his competitors apparently have no scruples about profiting from the chaos created by pressure groups. Early last July, Georgia newspapers reported a statement by G. S. Hubbard, director of the State Department of Education's division of instructional materials, to the effect that the McGraw-Hill Book Company, to induce Georgia to put its own text on Georgia's approved list, was willing to take up the 30,000 copies of Magruder for which the State of Georgia no longer had any use. "They suggested they might offer us a generous exchange price on the Magruder book for their new book," Hubbard said. And this was not the only "exchange" offer he had received.

Teachers have been more willing than authors and publishers to defend textbooks under attack. When Little Rock's Board of Education banned Magruder, it did so despite the fact that continued use of the book had been recommended by the faculty of the high school, the principal, and the district superintendent. In Georgia, the State Board of Education had to override the Professional Textbook Committee to ban Magruder. There is now a movement under way in the Georgia Education Association to have the state legislature delegate textbook-adoption power exclusively to "people actually engaged in public education." At Queens College, the teachers in the history department wanted to keep Morison and Commager, but the administration insisted that it be dropped.

TEACHERS by themselves, and through their professional organizations, can go only so far. They are handicapped in their fight against censorship because traditions of classroom freedom from outside dictation are, in many localities, notoriously weak; a recent report on "The Freedom of the Public School Teacher" by the National Education Association reveals that teachers are becoming more and more subject to intimidation by various pressure groups. To an increasing extent, the NEA is looking to community action to support teachers against these attacks. This is a reasonable policy to pursue—the teachers, after all, have no place to turn but to the

community—and one that should be endorsed by citizens interested in the welfare of their schools. But it is not without its own perils: by inviting the community to participate in the defense of textbooks, is there not some risk of further inflaming tempers and ideologies, of further widening the gap between objective criticism and partisan denunciation? Is there not real danger of further involving teachers and teaching materials with sections of the community that may be ignorant, irresponsible, and all too willing themselves to flex the muscle of censorship? Might it not end with an ugly spectacle of stereotype pitted against stereotype, smear against smear?

Dr. Willard E. Goslin, the former superintendent of schools in Pasadena, California, may have overlooked this problem when, in a speech before the United Parents Association in New York City on December 8, he invited community groups to share not only in the task of defending books—he mentioned specifically American history textbooks—but in selecting them as well. But what do labor unions, chambers of commerce, and parents generally know about American history? And will not their presence on textbook-adoption committees enhance the tendency of publishers to turn out books designed to

please any particular interest that happens to be dominant—texts which will amount to nothing more than special pleadings disguised as history?

It is the scholar's role to rise above special interests. He is not always successful, but Professor Epps, whom I have cited before, is quite right in the contention that "so far in our history, no group has been able to view our society and set-up as objectively and intelligently as a group of devoted professional scholars. So far, we have wisely looked to such scholars to write the textbooks through which we want our youth to be introduced to the various fields of knowledge."

It will be necessary to remain constantly alert to see that a conflict over textbooks does not degenerate into a conflict of ideologies in which everyone will be his own authority and will feel called upon to get in a lick. That way lies calamity. Qualified criticism, not pressure tactics, is the appropriate means of making one's views felt insofar as the writing and revision of textbooks are concerned. To the extent that the NEA intends to seek community support in defending this thesis against irresponsible and demagogic agitation, it is engaged in a task which every citizen should ardently support.